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ABSTRACT

Navajo students have a 31% dropout rate, and it has been getting worse. Although considerable research has examined the reasons behind this dropout rate, little attention has been given to parental expectations of their children's education. Interviews with 45 parents of students attending Montezuma Creek Elementary School, a public school on the Navajo Reservation in San Juan County, Utah, investigated what parents expected of schools and how these expectations were being met. Education of these parents ranged from no formal education to associate degrees; most had attended a combination of public school and boarding school. All parents wanted their children to go to school, but no parent described any thought or action involving threats, rewards, bribes, or other manipulations in order to persuade a child to continue or complete schooling. When asked what they expected from their child's education, every parent answered, "a good job." In exploring the meaning of a good job, it became obvious that the real objective was a secure survival. In contrast, becoming an educated person did not have a high priority. The Navajo parents viewed the utilitarian aspects of schooling as desirable, but these aspects do not include a vision of who the child is, the child's place in the community, and what the community can become with the child's help. The results indicate that far too little educational attention has been given to the rights and responsibilities of dual citizenship in the Navajo Nation and the United States. Schools could become more relevant by acquainting children with community needs and paths to community service. Six tables summarize interview responses, and an appendix contains sample interview questions. Contains 12 references. (TD)

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EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY HELD BY NAVAJO PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

Beliefs, values, and life experiences interact in dynamic ways to form expectations and desires for the future. A child's behavior reflects parental and cultural influences as well as his own emerging beliefs and values (Williams & Ellison, 1996). Recently, a number of behaviors have been documented among Navajo youth which are disconcerting to the educational community and to the nation. Native American students have one of the highest dropout rates of any ethnic group in the United States (Swisher & Hoisch, 1992). Navajo students begin to leave school as early as kindergarten and continue at all levels (Brandt, 1992). The Navajo Nation dropout study, "Navajo Students at Risk" (Platero et al., 1986) calculated a 31% dropout rate for Navajo youth and noted that it has been growing progressively worse (Deyle, 1992).

Although considerable effort has been made to define the reasons behind this student behavior, very little attention has been given to Native American parents and the positive expectations they have for their children's school experience. Inasmuch as parental expectations provide the initial foundation for the child's expectations, it seems only reasonable to include the parents as an important resource in the search for solutions. If we are to increase the retention rate for Native American students, it is important to know what their parents expect of the schools and how these expectations are being met.

Educational expectations for children are usually expressed through the mission and goals of State Offices of Education, local school curriculum committees, the PTA, and other interested groups, as well as individual parents. When educational assumptions of the dominant culture are vocalized they generally include statements such as: schools should teach children knowledge, including their history and the history of other peoples; they should transfer the societal culture; and they should prepare them for life, including a career and parenthood, as well as teaching citizenship and problem solving skills that will enable them to meet their present and future needs.

Purpose of the Study

Given the problems surrounding Navajo education, such as high absenteeism, high dropout rates, and low test scores, we wanted to obtain what we thought would be parallel educational expectations held by Navajo parents for the education of <u>their</u> children. We assumed that the expectations of Navajo parents would range across a broad spectrum and would be similar to the expectations of the dominant culture. The research question was formulated to ask the Navajo parents: What do you expect from the education system for your child?

American Indian educators maintain that the consumers of education, the students, benefit

most when their schooling is seen as culturally relevant by them(Williams & Ellison, 1996). Although most of the parents in our sample had gained a formal education, many were still not comfortable and confident negotiating with school personnel regarding their child's education. Our intent was to give voice to the educational assumptions and expectations held by Navajo parents and to amplify that voice through presentation and publication.

METHODS

Data Collection

Data was gathered by conducting a personal interview with each subject. A questionnaire was constructed including both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The original series of questions was reviewed by knowledgeable consultants and the questionnaire was subsequently revised. Not all participants were asked all of the questions, but the questions were used to give structure to the interviews (see Appendix for a list of sample questions). Prior to the interview, the purpose and the procedure for the interview were explained to the participants. Each subject then read and signed the consent form, and was given his/her own copy of the document.

Twenty-five percent of the interviews were videotaped and written notes were taken by the interviewer during all non-videoed interviews. The researcher began each interview by asking the parent(s) to tell about his/her own educational experiences. After that general suggestion was given, more specific questions were asked to assist the parent in remembering certain aspects of his/her schooling. The parent was then asked questions relating to his/her children' s education, such as desired level of attainment, why the child should go to school (or not go to school), what he/she expects the school and education to do for the child, parental teachings regarding education and other significant areas of the child's upbringing, preferred place for traditional ways in the child's life, and relationship of education to the child's future lifestyle and employment.

Most interviews lasted one hour and were conducted one-on-one; however, several were joint husband and wife sessions. The interviewer presented each question and allowed the subjects to respond for as long as they desired. At the conclusion of the interview the subjects were given a framed Polaroid picture of themselves as a special note of appreciation. Transcripts were made of the interviews and responses were analyzed for attitudes toward educational expectations.

Subjects and Setting

There are approximately 4,500 members of the Navajo Nation scattered throughout San Juan County, in the corner of southeastern Utah. Most live in poverty, with neither electricity,

telephones, nor running water. Unemployment runs around 70%. About 90 to 95% of all Navajo families living on the reservation have at least one family member with a substance abuse problem. Between 30 to 50% of the children will not graduate from high school (Bernick & Spangler, 1995).

The sample consisted of a partially randomized selection of 45 parents of students attending Montezuma Creek Elementary School. This school is one of five public schools in the San Juan School District which qualified as the top five of forty "highly impacted schools" in the state of Utah. All five of the schools are on the Navajo Reservation and have received extra funding for the 1995-96 school year. The teen-aged children of the Navajo parents in this study attended White Horse High School, the most impacted school, also in Montezuma Creek (Grover, 1995).

Ninety-eight percent of the students are Navajo, of which 83% are of Limited English Proficiency. Statistically, almost half of the students come from families who prefer and adhere to the traditional lifestyle. The other half may be said to live in both worlds, or to be included in the emerging marginal class of Native Americans who are caught between traditional roots and white society. The parents of these students frequently work in modern jobs while practicing traditional ways at home (Grover, 1995; Williams & Ellison, 1996).

More females than males were interviewed and the majority had attended boarding school for at least one year of their education. Most had graduated from high school and several had completed at least one term of college. An unexpectedly high number had received Associate Degrees. However, two females and one male had never obtained any formal schooling.

The Navajo Nation was not randomly represented in this sample for several reasons: (1) Only those Navajos living in the Utah portion of the Navajo Reservation were interviewed. The largest part of the reservation, both in area and population, is in Arizona and New Mexico. (2) Only those Navajo parents whose children were attending, had attended, or would potentially attend the selected public elementary school on the Utah portion of the reservation were interviewed. Parents who preferred to send all of their children to boarding school were not represented. However, a few parents in the sample had one or more children in public school at the same time that they had one or more children in boarding school. (3) Two employees of the elementary school, hired to work as liaisons between the school and the students' parents, alternately acted as guide and, when needed, interpreter for the interviewer. The sample may have been influenced by the opinions of the liaisons as to which parents would be willing to participate in an interview. (4) Alcoholic or abusive parents were underrepresented. (5) Since this school is on the Navajo Reservation, only those Navajos living on the reservation were interviewed. Those living off the reservation may have had different life experiences, educational expectations, and

consequences in their lives.

Interviews were conducted either in the subject's home or in a private room at the elementary school. The location of the interviews seemed to have no selective effect on the willingness of the Navajo parents to share their opinions and/or feelings, nor on the content of the responses. The majority of the homes visited were situated in isolated locations "out on the mesa." A few of the participants lived in neighborhoods of twenty to thirty homes.

RESULTS

Education of Parents

The Navajo parents interviewed had accumulated a broad range of educational experiences. In the 1960's and 1970's from 35 to 85% of American Indian children were placed in non-Indian foster care or institutions, many of which were schools administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) (Byler, 1977; Plantz, Hubbell, Barrett, & Dobrec, 1989). Most of the parents in our sample had attended boarding school for at least one year. Their responses to that type of education were varied. Some had experienced discrimination and harsh treatment and stated they would never send their child to boarding school. Other parents felt that as a consequence of the high standards and expectations found in boarding schools they had received a superior education in comparison with their peers who had attended public schools. Often the relationship they had with their parents had a significant impact on whether, as children, they either accepted or disliked the time spent at boarding school. Some parents related memories of frequent, fun weekends spent with their families. The families of a few parents rarely spent weekends with their children who were at boarding school and at times did not even bring them home for vacations.

The most common educational background for all of the parents was a combination of public school and boarding school. We found that the experiences of parents attending public school and their responses to that schooling paralleled the variability found in those with boarding school experiences; some subjects remembered the happy times they had in high school playing on the basketball team, working in the office, or socializing with friends, while others remembered feeeling that school was a waste of time, made them feel "stupid," and that they did not need to go to school.

Many of the parents who received a public school education were bused from the reservation to their school located in an Anglo community. This introduced a multicultural element to their education since many of their classmates were not Native American. A few parents related instances of discrimination. The parents often did not feel that they were accepted by their white peers. One mother, as a teenager, was told that she would have to cut her long hair in order to be a

cheerleader. Most completed their schooling without having access to a Navajo teacher or counselor. One father related that as a senior in high school he had a Navajo teacher, for the first time. He finally felt understood by a teacher.

A few parents related the sacrifices they had made in order to gain their education. Some had arisen at 5 AM each day in order to catch the bus and then rode for an hour to school and later for another hour on the return trip. Others had to walk a long distance between their home and the bus stop. These parents feel unsympathetic toward the younger generation who do not appreciate and utilize the opportunity of convenient, high quality schooling that is available to them now.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, a few parents had a total lack of formal schooling. Others began school at age thirteen, received only a few years of education, or never learned to speak English. The most common reason given for the lack of education was that his/her youth was spent herding the sheep. Parents with the most limited education strongly wanted their own children to finish school. Others contributed to their own lack of formal education by choosing to quit school somewhere between the eighth and eleventh grade. The Navajo parents receiving limited formal education primarily suffered two types of negative consequences, emotional pain and lifestyle constraints. Table 1 lists some of the emotional results and Table 2 states some of the lifestyle restrictions that they experienced.

Not only did the parents describe their past, from both the educational and traditional Navajo aspects, but they also shared goals and aspirations for their own personal future. Table 3 presents a summary of some of these personal objectives.

Table 1

Negative Emotions Experienced by Navajo Parents with Limited Education

Longing for more education.
Emotional pain about lack of educational and resulting lifestyle opportunities.
Low self esteem.
Low self confidence.
Feeling of alienation from more educated peers.
Inability to verbalize feelings.
Want children to experience educational opportunities the parents never had.
Want children to not be like themselves.
Unhappy.
They felt embarrassed and inhibited, and they dropped out of school before graduation.

Table 2

Negative Impacts on Lifestyle Experienced by Navajo Parents with Limited Education

Speak only Navajo.

Severe limitation in gaining and keeping job.

Unable to attain professional status.

Geographic isolation. Family can only afford to live where no one else wants the land.

Impossible to get the material things they want.

Table 3

Some Personal Goals and Aspirations of Navajo Parents

Category	Goal
Educational	Get more education.
	Get an Associate Degree.
	Complete education and become a professional, e.g. a history teacher.
	Get a GED.
Lifestyle	Live off of the reservation.
	Always live on the reservation.
	Move to a city off of, but next to, the reservation to increase the children's development and opportunities.
	Live in Blanding and go to the branch of College of Eastern Utah there.
Career	Be a para-professional, e.g. a secretary.
Personal Growth	Develop herself through further education and training.
	Get out of the house, go places.
	Have friends.
	Participate in activities without children.
	Learn Navajo traditions from grandparents.
	Be happy.

Education of Children

The Navajos as a people are in a transitional period. The Navajo language has been a strong unifying force among members of the Navajo Nation. While a large majority of the parents in our study were bilingual in Navajo and English, only two parents indicated that their children

spoke Navajo fluently. Several parents reported that their children understood when they spoke to them in Navajo, but that they could not persuade them to respond in that language.

The preferences that parents had for whether or not their children learned Navajo or English were very personal and appeared primarily dependent on the parent's own life experiences. Parents who spent several years in boarding schools or were raised in a manner that they did not acquire fluency in the Navajo language typically felt it was important for their children to learn the language. However, they were at a disadvantage because they themselves were not prepared to teach it to their own children. On the other hand, a few families strongly wanted their children to become proficient in English as their first language. They felt that the ability to express themselves well in English was critical to their children's future scholastic and career opportunities.

About two-thirds of the parents were interviewed in their homes. When other family members were present, they invariably interacted with each other with affection and respect. Often those in the home were multigenerational and/or extended family. The parents' respect for their children extended to educational concerns. All parents expressed a desire for their children to go to school. Most wanted their children to graduate from high school. However, no parent described any thought or action involving threats, rewards, bribes, or other manipulations in order to persuade his/her child to continue or complete his/her schooling.

Parental Advice and Training

Navajos are very family oriented and the extended family is the center of the social structure (Mercer, 1996). General attributes of Navajo parents were commonly found to include concern for their children's education, and frequent, active involvement with their children, nieces, nephews, and their children's friends. The parents worked to provide emotional support for their children and they exhibited a readiness to sacrifice for the family, especially for children and the elderly. Several parents stated they wished they had more knowledge in order to be better parents and to better guide their children in preparing for their future. Many examples of parental advice and admonition were recorded during the study. Viewed as a whole they provide a tender picture of current Navajo parenting wisdom and values (see Table 4).

Jobs

In interviewing parents with such diverse educational backgrounds, it is reasonable to expect a broad variation in responses. Nevertheless, when each parent was asked what he

Table 4

Examples of Navajo Parents' Advice to their School Aged Children

Category	Advice
Education	"You are going to school for your own self. You will want money, you will want a job. Go to school."
	"Education is really important."
	"Higher education is very important."
	"Stay in school until you are ready to raise a family."
	"Make your teacher your hero."
	"Finish high school and don't be like me."
Lifestyle	"You should do better than I did."
	"Don't be ashamed."
	"Go for what you enjoy, what you want to do, what feels good to you, only be sensible about it."
	"I tell them to expect the consequences of their actions."
	"Don't be afraid to ask questions, in school or anywhere."
	"The important things are: relationships, interactions, and respect for women."
	"Treat everyone equally."
	"There is competition in the world."
	"You may have to live off the reservation in order to work."
	"Don't be afraid of what others say."
	"You have to be aggressive."
	"Strive to do your best."

expected from his/her child's education, every one answered, "A good job."

When asked what kind of job they would expect or like to see their child have as an adult, they all essentially replied that they would allow the child to make that decision himself. A few parents reported periodically talking to their children about future careers, permitting the child to choose his area of interest, and then exploring with the child what the job entailed and how he/she might best prepare for it.

As shown in Table 5, the parents in this study have had many different jobs; but much of the work history was not dependent upon a formal high school education. Even when parents had

Table 5

Examples of Past or Current Employment of Navajo Parents in the Study and the Number (N*) that have Held that Position

Type of Job	Number	Type of Job	Number
Teacher's aide	4	Tutor	2
Custodian	1	Substitute teacher	4
Elementary school teacher	5	Military, 1 male, 1 female	
Bookstore director at community college	1	Railroad - outdoor, physical work	1
School bus driver	1	Emergency Medical Technician	1
High school teacher	1	Accounting	1
Electronics assembly line	1	New worker recruiter	1
Mechanic	1	Nursing home supervisor and manager	1
Nurse's aide	1	Housekeeper	1
Beautician	1	Heavy equipment operator - roads	1
Electronic wiring	1	Construction foreman	1
School principal	1	Independent handicrafts maker	6
Store clerk	2	Executive secretary for oil company - male	1
Seamstress at sewing factory	2	School cook	1

*Note. N equals 47, however, some parents had been employed in two or more occupations, while other parents indicated no work experience.

worked hard to gain their schooling or specialized training, they were often disappointed in their efforts to gain employment in their field. One mother spent ten months in the Job Corps learning welding. After returning home to the reservation she discovered that there were no welding jobs available. Following graduation with an Associate Degree in Oil Field Management one of the fathers was unable to find and/or keep a job in the rich oil fields on the Navajo Reservation. The parents repeatedly stated, "I want my child to have a good job. I don't want my child to be like me."

The Navajo parents who were interviewed had a difficult time characterizing what they meant by a "good job." Other than wanting the work to be "steady," most parents defined a "good job" by the possessions it would enable their children to acquire. Actual job descriptors were noticeably lacking.

Table 6

Examples of Positive Elements of Schooling as Reported by the Parents in this Study

Category	Benefit
Personal growth	Learning social skills.
	Meeting new people, making friends, and talking with friends.
	Extracurricular activities, such as sports.
	Travel opportunities.
	Becoming more confident and outgoing.
	Being happier.
	Feeling satisfaction at the ability to finish school.
	Patience.
	Learning more coping strategies.
	Becoming independent.
	Learning time management through finishing homework on time.
	Self esteem.
Jobs	Having a good resume.
	Being able to fill out applications for jobs.
	Having a washer and dryer.
Knowledge	Knowing more words and how to use them.
	Becoming acquainted with the world.
	Learning from peers.
	Learning how to shop in order to get the best prices
	Learning about electricity. "It is useful for storing frozen pizza."
	Learning to understand his/her own body.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The major findings of this study relate to the parents' desire for their children to ultimately have a good job. During the process of data collection the researchers spent time becoming familiar with the staff and school facilities as well as observing in the classroom and during special projects. The talented and dedicated staff serve in a beautiful school filled with bright, orderly and cheerful children. Parents and school personnel frequently tell the children that they must go to school in order to get a job in the future. Conversely, if they don't study now they will not be able to get the work they will want. Nevertheless, our results indicate that high school graduates and Associate Degree holders as well as those non-degreed parents have been mostly unable to fulfill their own goals of securing a good job. By and large these parents still maintain their trust in education's promise to deliver a desirable career to those who persist to graduation.

In exploring the meaning of a good job to the Navajo parents interviewed, it became obvious that the real objective was survival, and following that was security, or a secure survival. In order for the Navajo children's education to become the bridge that connects them with valuable employment we present some recommendations for further development.

Earning a degree and becoming educated need to be integrated from the perspectives of those both guiding and receiving education. Being an educated person means different things to different people. We had hoped to learn what it means, in a general sense, to the Navajo parents in our study. We learned, however, that becoming an educated person does not have a high priority, but rather the value is placed upon becoming a person who is able to attain and maintain a good job. The parents felt that the most valuable part of the school's role in job attainment was conferring a diploma or certificate.

Schools should teach their students, and publicize to the community, the strong relationship between the skills and knowledge that they teach and the requirements for rewarding employment. For example, mathematical literacy skills are necessary for jobs ranging from grocery store clerk to banker, accountant, chemist, and engineer. Verbal skills are useful for building on the job relationships and teamwork, as well as being mandatory for careers in fields such as teaching, social work, and communications.

Furthermore, teachers should emphasize the direct application of the material being taught to the child's current life. It is difficult for a young child to muster much care or concern for a generic, hypothetical job placed in his/her seemingly distant future. Just as the Navajo mother who wanted to learn about electricity because she valued it for allowing her to store frozen pizza, children will find schooling valuable in relation to how it can benefit them at that point in time.

The aspects of schooling that the Navajo parents viewed as desirable or useful are shown in Table 6. These are utilitarian aspects of schooling, but they do not include a vision of who the child is, who he/she can become, his/her place in the community, and what the community can become with his/her help. Public education is usually thought of as education for the general good of the society and is often described as a "liberal education." Thus a prime purpose of a public education is educating for citizenship. "There is only one road to democracy: education." (Barber, 1992, p. 15.) According to Goodlad (1996, p. 112),

> "The mission of schooling comes down to two related kinds of enculturation; no other institution is so charged. The first is for political and social responsibility as a citizen. The second is for maximum individual development, for full participation in the human conversation..."

Navajos hold a unique position as citizens of the Navajo Nation, while residing within and holding simultaneous citizenship in the United States of America. As indicated by the results of this study, far too little educational attention has been placed on learning and participating in the rights, privileges, and responsibilities that attach to citizenship in both nations.

The Utah Navajos need to use all of their resources. Their children are their finest and most valuable resource. Realistic needs assessments can be made for the area. It is possible to make general and detailed plans of what is required in order to improve the quality of life of all residents. The results should be disseminated to the general public and the schools. Elementary school is not too early to acquaint children with a valid description of the needs of the community and ways that they can serve now, and with continued preparation, in the future. Then school could become more relevant to the child, to the family, and to their way of life.

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APPENDIX

Sample Questions used for Interviewing the Navajo Parents

- Tell me about your education.
- What would you change about your education if you could?
- How has your education helped you in your life?
- Do you want your child to go to school?
- Why do you want your child to go to school?
- How do you encourage your child about his/her education?
- How much schooling do you expect your child to have?
- What kind of job do you think he might have when he grows up?
- What kind of job would you like him to have when he grows up?
- What do you think your child will need to be happy when he grows up?
- How do you feel about the school teaching the Navajo language?
- What are some of the traditional ways that you are making a point to teach your child?
- Would you like your child to live on the reservation when he grows up?
- Have you lived off of the reservation?
- If so, why did you come back to the reservation?
- Are there some special things that the father teaches his sons to help them grow up to become men? What?
- Are there some special things that the mother teaches her daughters to help them grow up to become women? What?